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EARLY LODI TELEPHONE

by Ralph Lea and Lucy Reller

Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1875 and two years later the first telephone was installed in New York.

Laying of wire for the telegraph was started in 1844 and by 1880 there was over 300,000 miles of wire nationwide. Early experiments were made over some of these lines for telephones.

April 7, 1882, a Sunday, the Western Union wire was used by J.I. Sabin, president of the Sacramento Telephone Company to carry on a telephone conversation from Galt to San Francisco by way of San Jose and on to Oakland by cable. The operators at all four towns joined in the conversation and the voices and words were distinctly audible.

It was in 1884 that Robert L. Graham was asked to install a telephone in his drug store at the northwest corner of Sacramento and Elm streets. A lot of the early phones were put in drug stores as they stayed open late and people had access for longer periods of service, day or night. Graham's Drug store was linked by a long distance line to Stockton which connected with Oakland, San Francisco and other "far away" places.

The telephone line to Stockton was strung on low poles and fences and was subject to many circuits being broken by farmers with their farming equipment.

In 1886 the Sunset Telephone Company was making preparations to extend their business to Lodi and Galt from Stockton. It was a year later in September when three railroad cars of



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Lodi telephone operators, circa 1911. ▲



▲ *Lodi Telephone Employees Dinner inside the Lodi Tamale & Ravioli Factory on Sacramento Street.*

poles arrived. They moved quickly as construction began on both ends of the route and on October 7, 1887, Officer Hornage was sending his voice on the wires from Stockton to a friend in the "Sporting Center," Lodi.

The first business telephone (or talkaphone as many called it) was installed in the Henderson Brothers Hardware store and a few days later, Dr. J.M. Blodgett, pioneer dentist, had a telephone installed in his office, which was then in the Peirano Building above the Toggery on Sacramento Street.

R.L. Graham, first manager of the Lodi Telephone office and the first local person to speak over the telephone had a lot of people come to his drug store just to see the telephone. Now, with two more telephones in town, Lodians started calling at the offices of Henderson Brothers and Dr. Blodgett to use the telephones just to



▲ *1909 Lodi Telephone Operators*

PHOTO COURTESY OF SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUM



▲ *Sunset Telephone & Telegraph Co.; North Church Street in front of C.L. Van Buskirk's home, 1897.*

see how it felt to talk over a telephone.

The 1888 Sunset Telephone Directory lists Graham's, The Grangers Co-operative Association General Merchandise, across Elm Street from the drug store, J.C. Higginbotham, proprietor of Sargent House, B. Rinfert, Fashion Stables, and L.V. Shippe, a Lodi rancher.

Mary (Sollars) Rolls came to Lodi in 1894 and became Lodi's first telephone operator, working from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. She worked in Ferguson's Tailor Shop with Jessie Acker sewing and answering the telephone when it rang. Ferguson sold the shop to J. Harry Lillie. On September 26, 1897 the Sunset Telephone Exchange was established with 27 telephones. The telephone office had moved to the Friedberger and Kaiser



Telephone man in 1910, near Fred Cary's house on the north side of Pine Street, near Church Street. ▲



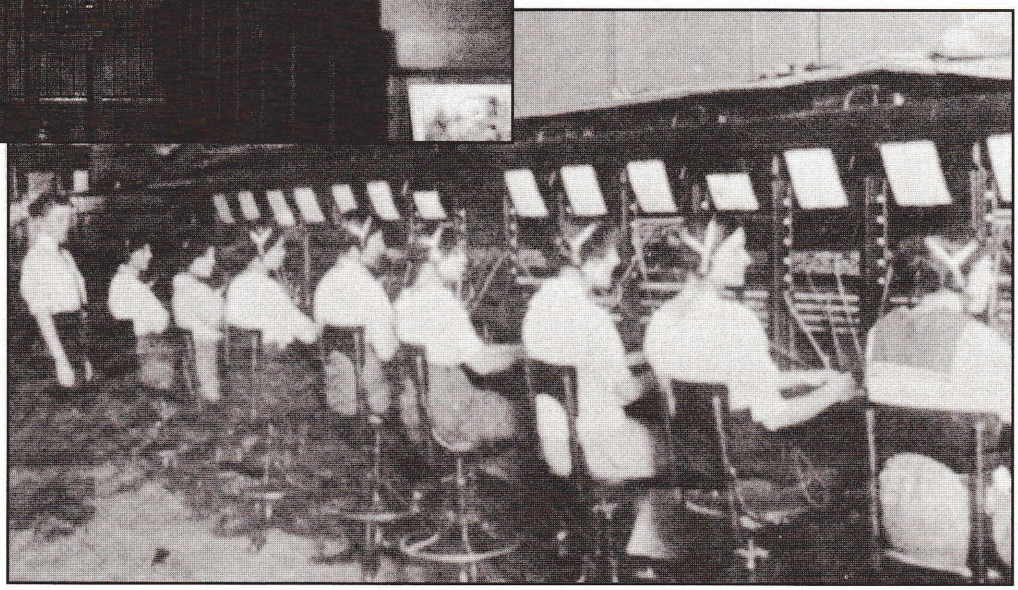
▲ *Lodi Telephone Office on Pine Street, before 1920. Photo taken through outside glass.*

store. In May 1898, L.E. Myer became the new manager.

The 1899 Telephone Directory which then served the entire Pacific coast, listed Lodi as having five resident and twenty-seven business telephones.

In December of 1901, the Lillie Brothers started putting up higher poles for the telephone lines and the telephone and telegraph exchange was moved to the north side of Pine Street into the tailor shop of J. Harry and Theron Lillie who were now the new managers.

The number of telephones had increased to fifty-four and the subscribers listed were: S.B. Axtell, J.A. Anderson, M.E. Angier, Arlin & Smith, A. Bauer, F.W. Beckman, Frank Beckman and Beatty, Dr. J.M. Blodgett, Dr. E. Burchard, Bank of Lodi, Cary



1913; 110 W. Pine Street (l to r): Head Operator Martha (Peightal) Moore, Nina Milloglas, Erna (Buel) Sturla, Margret Robertson, Frances Kesley, Ida (Rogers) Bandren, Mae (Hepper) Tonini, Anna (Milloglas) Dixon, and Hazel (Dutschke) Sanguinetta. ▲



▲ *The first Lodi telephone was installed in the R.L. Graham Drug Store, located the northwest corner of Elm and Sacramento Streets, first floor.*



▲ *Lodi Telephone Office on Pine Street, Christmas.* PHOTO COURTESY OF SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUM

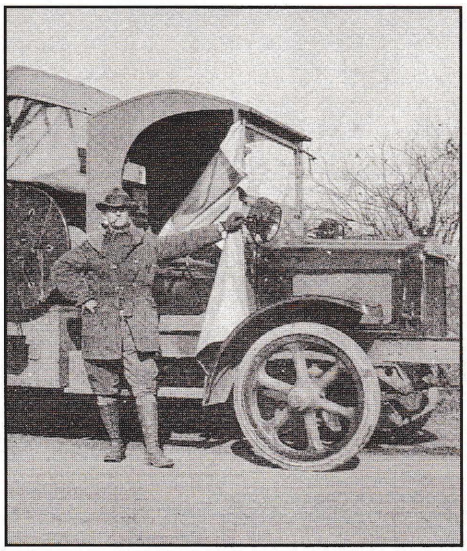
Bros. Frank Christman & Co., John Dougherty, Martin Duffy, W.R. Ellis, Max Elwert, Earl Fruit Co., Henry Ellis, Friedberger & Kaiser, Joe Friedberger, Guggols & Reasner, R.L. Graham, Dr. C.H. Gordon, Henderson Bros., F.O. Hale, Herald Office, Dr. Arther, Ed Hurchins, Dr. G.C. Jacobs, S.A. Kitchner, Lodi Home Bakery, Lodi Hotel, A.J. Larson, T.R. Lillie, Lodi Wine Store, Lodi Lumber Yard, Dr. Mason, Mason Bros., J.M.C. Murphy, Producers Fruit Co., G. Peirano, C.D. Russell, Bart Rinfret, R.T. Rutledge, R. Sollars, H.B. Stannard, Southern Pacific Freight Depot, William Siegalkoff, Sentinel Office, Taylor House, Dr. C.B. Tennyson, Wright & Corson, E.G. Williams and Young's Lumber Yard.

One year later there were 95 subscribers and with five more telephones the company would allow night service with an additional charge. By 1902 the United States had 2,371,000 telephones.

Farmer lines were extended north and south with 10 parties (subscribers) who would own the lines. There were low voltage batteries and hand cranked magnetos in the wall telephones. Long and short rings were used to call other parties – such as one long and two short rings. To call the operator was one long ring. J.L. Bennet, Henry Pope and John Cory has early farm telephones.

March 7, 1904, the new Telephone Directory listed some two hundred names for the Lodi area. The "talkaphone" was creating the age of unlimited chatter. Party lines provided a source of information, gossip and entertainment with unauthorized listening to other conversations. This was called "rubbering."

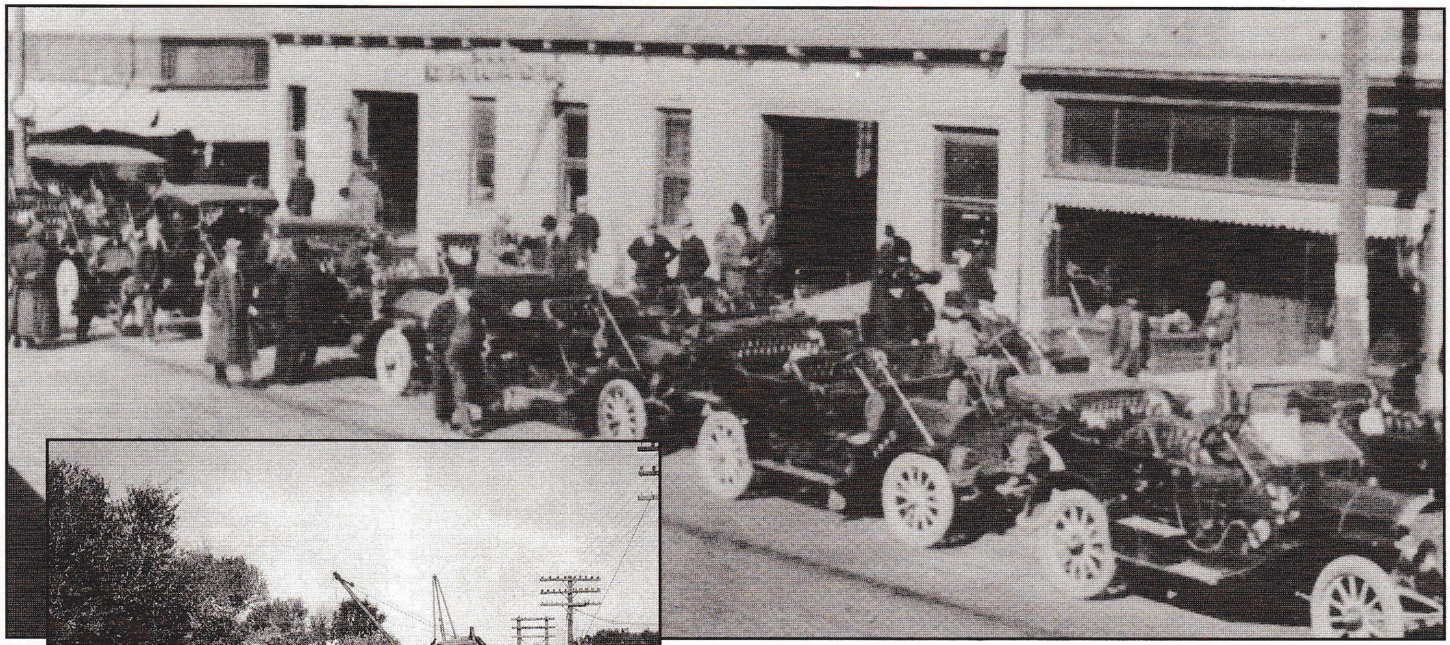
J. Harry Lillie continued to manage the telephone company but his brother Theron concentrated on the auto garage and kept the few cars that were in Lodi running. In 1907 the



▲ *Early telephone truck.* BUD SULLIVAN PHOTO



November 1913; 110 W. Pine Street. Bill Bull leans against the radiator. (l ro r): Chief Operator Hostedder and Foreman Bill Atwater next to him, Nina Milloglas, Martha Peightal, Anna Dixon, Hazel Dutschke, and Frances Kesley. ▲



Pine Street – Far right: Bank of Lodi, Lillie Bros. Taylor Shop and Telephone Office, Lillie Bros. Garage. ▲

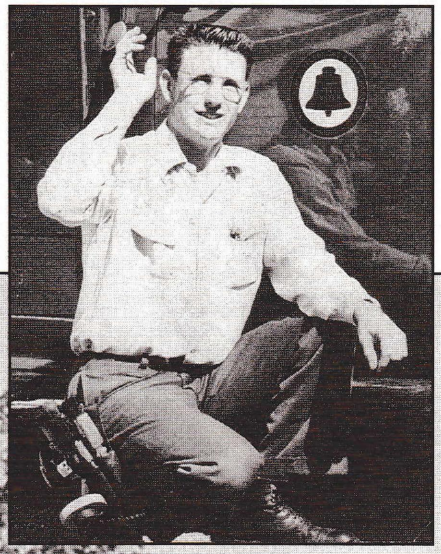


◀ *Construction crew in the Stockton area, circa 1940's.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF BUD SULLIVAN



▲ *Lodi Telephone Office, circa 1945. (l to r): Elsie Burgstahler, Eddie White, Ida Schmierer, Clara Wilcox, Maxine Castelanelli, Elaine Ogle, Shirley (Ryan) Weahunt and Eunice Ware.*



◀ *Jim Boyd, long-time Lodi Telephone repairman.*

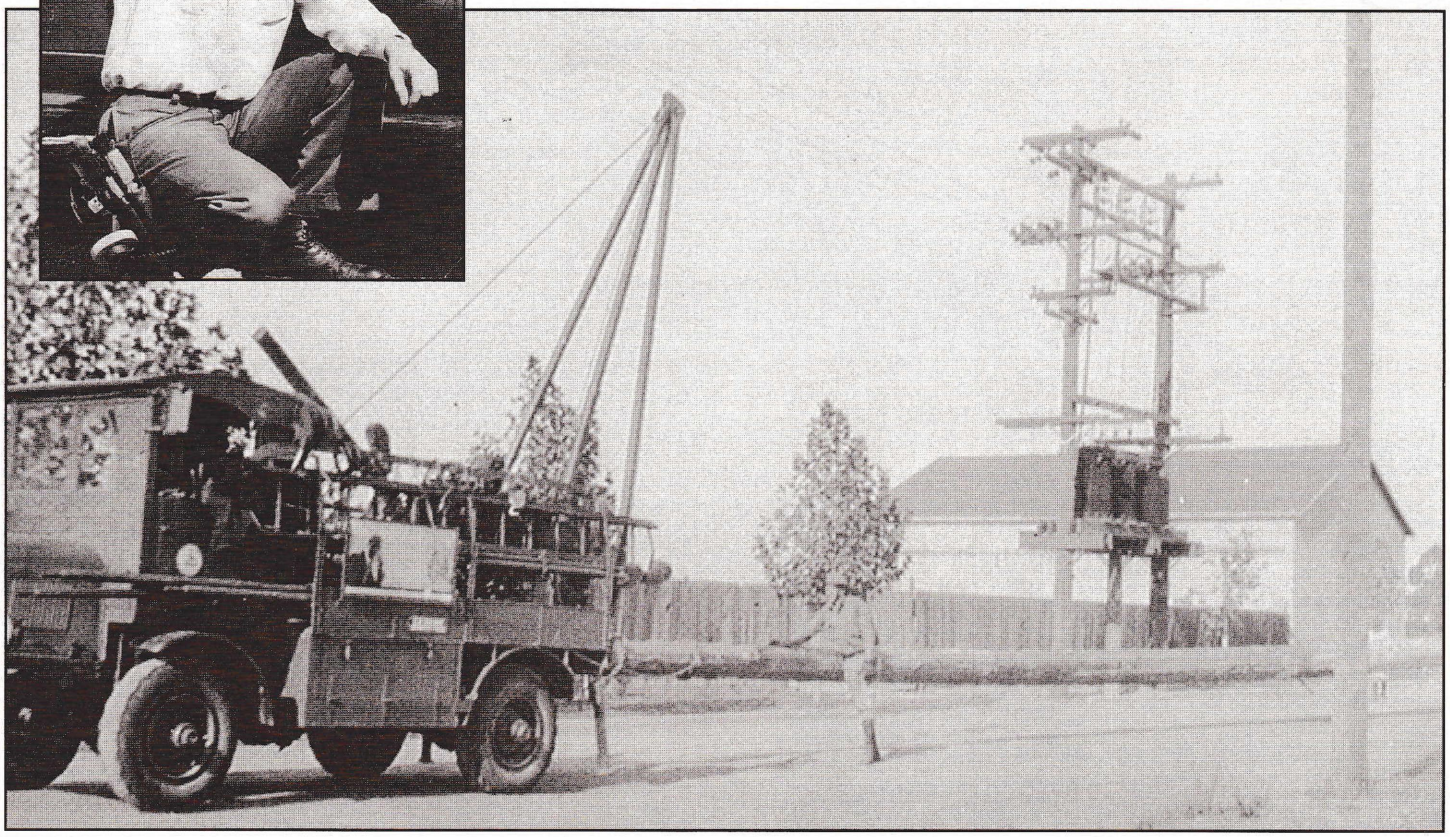
Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company purchased the Lodi system from the Sunset Company. J. Harry was still manager and the switchboard stayed in Lillie's building.

The next year C.L. Van Buskirk built a new telephone building on the south side of Pine Street between School and Church streets.

For a private line in Lodi in 1910 one paid $2.50 a month. The same service cost $5.00 in Stockton. Farmers paid 40 cents a mile or $4.85 a year.

Mae (Hepper) Tonini started as a telephone operator in Lodi in 1911, when she just came out of high school. When she retired 40 years later, she recalled in the beginning that the operators knew just about everyone that would come on the line. They were involved in all the human events, such as births, marriages and deaths. Callers often would ask for other subscribers by name instead of number. Others would call Mae to say they would not be at home and gave her another number to call.

The William Jackson grocery store was just across Pine Street and the Piggly Wiggly grocery store was just to



▲ *Setting telephone poles, early Rio truck.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF BUD SULLIVAN

the north on School Street. Housewives would ask Mae to look out the window and tell them what groceries were on sale on huge signs posted on the store windows.

The switchboard was used to connect telephones directly with each other. In the early days when you called the operator at "Central" by cranking a small magneto and later when you lifted the telephone receiver to call a number, a light appeared on the switchboard in front of an operator. She plugs in an electrical connection to talk to you. When she, (there were only women operators) hears the number you are asking for, you are connected if it is on her board of 200 plugs. If not on her board she plugs you into other boards. If you are asking for a long distance number they were handled by special operators.

In 1913 Lodi had over 1,000 telephones and in 1922 Cornelius (Big Mike) Sullivan was working in Lodi for $3.00 a day helping string the first local aerial cable to bring telephone service to 300 additional homes in Lodi. The population was only 8,000 at that time, but by 1926 the town had over 2,000 telephones.

The town and telephone company were growing and a person could no



Open House in February of 1952, operators of Pacific Telephone & Telegraph.operators. ▲ (l to r): Maxine Castelanelli, unknown, Betty Rader, Shirley Hoffman, unknown, Florence Hugo, LaVerne Nicewonger, Clara Wilcox, Irene Gloss, Unknown, Evelyn Gentner, unknown, unknown.

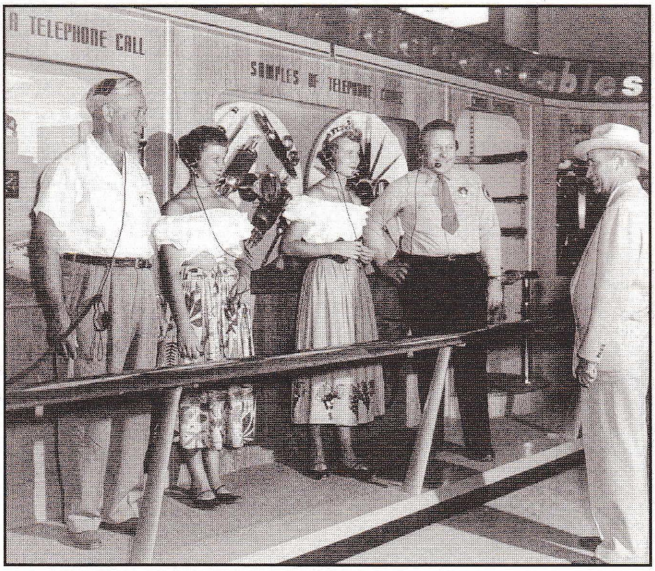
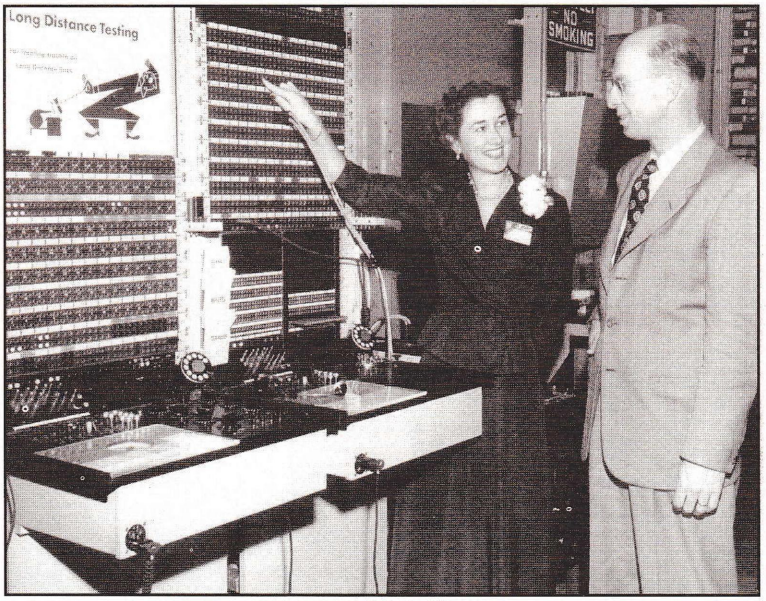


PHOTO COURTESY OF SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUM

▲ *Grape Festival telephone display. Verne Hoffman, Festival Princess and Queen, Police Chief Fred Hunt and George Creighton.*



Lodi Phone Company Open House, Feb. 26-28, 1952. Mrs. Clara Bitterman, ▲ Office Cashier and Earl Alcorn, County Schools. $730,000 dial system cut over July 1951.

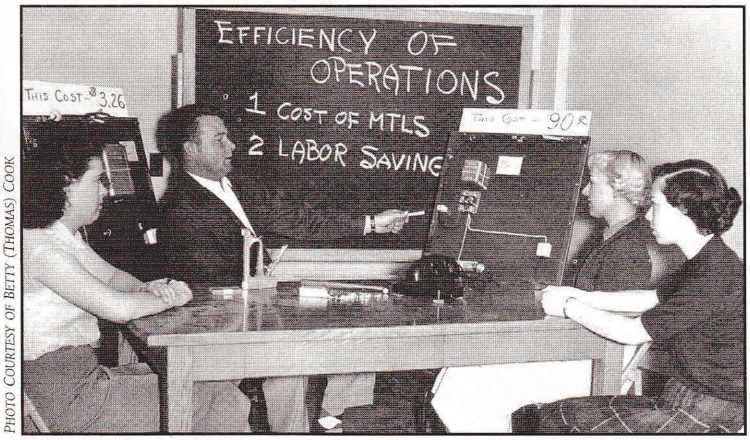
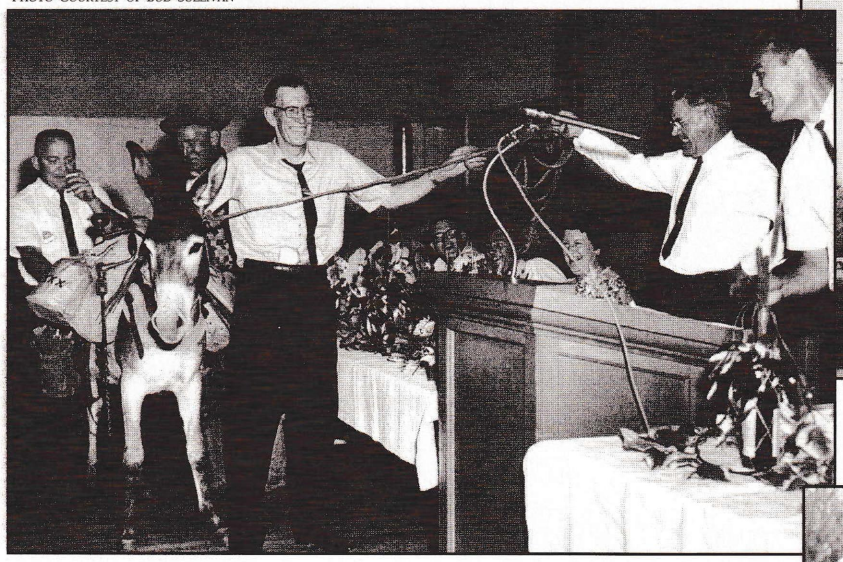


PHOTO COURTESY OF BETTY (THOMAS) COOK

▲ *April 30, 1953. Darrell Ryan, Installer Repairman, explaining how improvements in equipment reflect in economy and efficiency of company operations. (l ro r): Mrs. Margarette Racicot, operator; Darrell Ryan, intaller repairman; Miss Betty Thomas, plant operator and Miss Betty Rieth, operator.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF BUD SULLIVAN



▲ *Lodi Legion Building, July 1, 1961. Retirement Dinner after 41 years for Cornelius (Big Mike) Sullivan.*



April 28, 1961: Dona Bohnet and George Creighton, PT&T Manager, City Hall Foyer. ▲

PHOTO COURTESY OF DONA BOHNET



Telephone life-saving corps was comprised of eight women, including Miss Sarah Ritz, Ida Cresman, Elsie Burgstahler, and Merrie Palma. ▲

PHOTO COURTESY OF SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUM

longer call central and ask for a name instead of a number or ask the operator to wake them up by ringing at a certain time. Equipment was invented to replace the operator.

Lodi made a large expansion in 1950 by building a large two-story plus basement at the southeast corner of Church & Elm streets.

George Creighton was manager following George A. Burrel. In July 1951 Lodi's new dial central office was put on line with 7,794 telephones at a cost of $730,000.

On February 26 - 28 an open house was held from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m. and 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. for school children and adults. Exhibits included a "step-by-step" dial demonstration with toll dialing. Over 5,000 people visited the building.

In the spring of 1958 Lodi started nationwide dialing and in February they had to use the Endicott (EN) for long distance calls plus area code numbers. By July the 11,500 local telephones had 48,000 calls a day.

June 17, 1959 a mobile telephone service erected a 120 foot antenna tower on the roof of the central office in Stockton.

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